



"Pulls zero punches, bares all the fangs."

—STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES, *NEW YORK TIMES*

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# CERTAIN DARK THINGS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**SILVIA MORENO-GARCIA**

## PRAISE FOR *CERTAIN DARK THINGS*

“Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s gritty novel is steeped in the history of Mexico City and vampire lore and yet manages to deftly reinvent the bloodsucker. . . . *Certain Dark Things* packs a wallop.”

—Paul Tremblay, author of *A Head Full of Ghosts*

“With its vibrant prose and stellar world-building, *Certain Dark Things* is one of the best books I’ve read in years.”

—V. E. Schwab, *New York Times* bestselling author

“A delicious, elegant, gritty vampire noir. Moreno-Garcia has created a world that pulses with life and terror and honesty.”

—Daniel José Older, *New York Times* bestselling author

“A lush and haunting supernatural noir, Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s *Certain Dark Things* is visceral, beautiful, and teeming with originality and complexities. Perfect for those looking for a crime novel with a little more bite than usual.”

—Alex Segura, author of *Star Wars Poe Dameron: Free Fall*  
and the Pete Fernandez series

“Silvia Moreno-Garcia carves out the heart of Mexico City, and then eats it, in this riveting noir-punk reinvention of vampire lore. *Certain Dark Things* is exquisitely vicious and brutally beautiful.”

—Ann Aguirre, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Dark, inimitable, and so very, very cool. Unmissable.”

—Lavie Tidhar, World Fantasy Award–winning author of *Osama*

“Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s novel lets us fall in love with many perspectives before she breaks our hearts and puts us back together again.”

—Fran Wilde, author of *Updraft*

“*Certain Dark Things* is arguably *the* vampire novel for the twenty-first century.”

—*New York Journal of Books*

“Confirms that Moreno-Garcia is an author to watch.”

—*Publisher’s Weekly*

“The Mexican setting is a huge part of the allure of this new novel from Moreno-Garcia, as are the fascinating varieties of vampires she sets forth.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“All the characters in this book are as sharply realized as the city in which they live and fight. . . . I love to see compelling new takes on vampires, and *Certain Dark Things* succeeds beautifully. . . . Smart, tender and insightful.”

—NPR

“With *Certain Dark Things*, Silvia Moreno-Garcia demonstrates that there is always more to be done with familiar figures such as the vampire, and that in the hands of a talented writer, the creatures can rise to new (un) life.”

—*Locus*

“Moreno-Garcia’s characters are vivid and compelling, as is her prose. As a novel, it’s fantastic: honest, wrenching, compassionate, and brutal.”

—*Tor.com*

“One hopes that return visits to this urban fantasy world are in the offing.”

—*New York Times*

“This is a new favorite.”

—Book Riot

“With dark and delicious elegance, Moreno-Garcia delivers a satisfyingly bloody vampire story with a tantalizing twist.”

—*The Globe and Mail*

**ALSO BY SILVIA MORENO-GARCIA**

*The Beautiful Ones*

*Mexican Gothic*

*Gods of Jade and Shadow*

*Untamed Shore*

*Signal to Noise*



# **CERTAIN DARK THINGS**

**SILVIA MORENO-GARCIA**



**NIGHTFIRE**

**A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  
NEW YORK**

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

CERTAIN DARK THINGS

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*To the vampire: Germán Robles*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Thanks to David Bowles for correcting the Nahuatl employed in the novel.

Thanks also to my mother for letting me watch horror movies late at night, thanks to my great-grandmother for narrating horror movies to me, thanks to my children for bearing with me when I write and drift far away.

Thanks finally to my husband, who is my first reader and for whom I write. He is the salt in every dish I taste.

## NOTE TO THE READER

You are holding in your hands a book with a strange genesis, that came back from the dead.

In 2011, my short story “A Puddle of Blood” appeared in a Canadian anthology called *Evolve Two: Vampire Stories of the Future Undead*. It starred Domingo, a garbage collector, and Atl, a vampire. I had toyed with the idea of both characters for a while and brought them together for this short meeting. Afterwards, I became interested in using the story as the springboard for a novel and wrote *Certain Dark Things*.

*Twilight* had been a big hit in 2005, but by the time *Certain Dark Things* made the rounds with editors, the market had been bled dry. To make things worse, it was a weird book. It was a noir—I call it a neon-noir—set in an alternate Mexico City. Editors were puzzled. We found a young, energetic editor that liked it and the novel sold to Thomas Dunne Books, and published in 2016.

Just around the time it was going to be released, Thomas Dunne was reorganized and downsized. *Certain Dark Things* and my other novel under contract were orphaned. They quickly went out of print.

Then the book seemed to acquire an odd second life. It kept appearing in lists of recommended books. People emailed me each week asking where they could find a copy. A friend told me the hardcover was going for \$150 on eBay. It seemed like I was witnessing the birth of a cult book, something that might be spoken about in years to come but never reprinted.

But an odd thing was happening at the same time my book disappeared. Horror seemed to be making a comeback. Nightfire was announced. It was, wonder of wonders, a horror imprint from a large publisher. And suddenly, *Certain Dark Things*, which had been quietly put in its coffin and packed away, was alive again.

Something else happened while I wrote this book: Germán Robles, to whom I dedicated this book, died. Robles played the Count Karol de Lavud in a couple of Mexican horror films. In the 1990s, he was acting in the play *The Lady in Black*. I saw him on stage and got his autograph afterwards. Robles inspired several characters in my short stories, including the vampire in “Stories with Happy Endings,” and the vampire Bernardino in *Certain Dark Things*.

As a child, I spent a lot of time watching black-and-white Mexican movies. Everything from comedies to noirs showed up and I'd marathon through four or five flicks on a weekend. I liked Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing and Vincent Price, but I loved Robles.

My high school friends say that when I was a teenager I'd tell them I was going to become a vampire. I don't remember it, but I believe it. I was a weirdo. I blasted Bauhaus, carried Truman Capote under my arm, tried to teach myself French because of Baudelaire, and I was in love with Robles. Not in a romantic, *Twilight* way, but in love with the black-and-white world he inhabited. They don't make movies like they did then. And you don't fall in love with silver nitrate anymore, but I did. I loved the oh-so-fake-looking sets of his movies, the shadows and the shots of him staring disdainfully at the camera.

If there was a celebrity I always wanted to meet, it was Robles.

My husband used to live near a cafe where Robles often had supper with his friends. I could have, I suppose, waited for him there, but that just seemed stalkery. And I didn't want to do it because there's a difference between the performer and the character they give flesh to. I understood the separation.

I dedicated the book to Robles after asking my husband if that seemed like too much of a fangirl thing. My thought process was that I'd write, "To Robles, the vampire," and when the book was out I'd mail him a copy. Maybe he wouldn't be able to read it (I didn't know if he knew English), or maybe he wouldn't care.

"He's eighty-something," I told my husband. "I should finish the book quick, what if he dies?"

And then, of course, he did die. Before the book was out.

I've only cried over one celebrity's death. It was Robles.

*Certain Dark Things* is back and it's still dedicated to Germán Robles. I like to think he had something to do with its revival, seeing as he was never able to stay in his coffin.

If you look in the back of this book, you will find some new extra content created for this edition. I hope you enjoy the return of the vampires.

*Silvia Moreno-Garcia*  
August 14, 2020

**CERTAIN  
DARK  
THINGS**



Collecting garbage sharpens the senses. It allows us to notice what others do not see. Where most people would spy a pile of junk, the rag-and-bone man sees treasure: empty bottles that might be dragged to the recycling center, computer innards that can be reused, furniture in decent shape. The garbage collector is alert. After all, this is a profession.

Domingo was always looking for garbage and he was always looking at people. It was his hobby. The people were, not the garbage. He would walk around Mexico City in his long, yellow plastic jacket with its dozen pockets, head bobbed down, peeking up to stare at a random passerby.

Domingo tossed a bottle into a plastic bag, then paused to observe the patrons eating at a restaurant. He gazed at the maids as they rose with the dawn and purchased bread at the bakery. He saw the people with shiny cars zoom by and the people without any cash jump onto the back of the bus, hanging with their nails and their grit to the metallic shell of the moving vehicle.

That day, Domingo spent hours outside, pushing a shopping cart with his findings, listening to his portable music player. It got dark and he bought himself dinner at a taco stand. Then it started to rain, so he headed into the subway station.

He was a big fan of the subway system. He used to sleep in the subway cars when he first left home. Those days were behind. He had a proper place to sleep now, and lately he collected junk for an important rag-and-bone man, focusing on gathering used thermoplastic clothing. It was a bit harder to work the streets than it was to work a big landfill or ride the rumbling garbage trucks, sorting garbage as people stepped outside their houses and handed the collectors their plastic bags. A bit harder but not impossible, because there were small public trash bins downtown, because the restaurants left their garbage in the alleys behind them, and because people also littered the streets, not caring to chase the garbage trucks that made the rounds every other morning. A person with enough brains could make a living downtown, scavenging.

Domingo didn't think himself very smart, but he got by. He was well fed and he had enough money to buy tokens for the public baths once a week. He felt like he was really going places, but entertainment was still out of his reach. He had his comic books and graphic novels to keep him

company, but most of the time, when he was bored, he would watch people as they walked around the subway lines.

It was easy because few of them paid attention to the teenager leaning against the wall, backpack dangling from his left shoulder. Domingo, on the other hand, paid attention to everything. He constructed lives for the passengers who shuffled in front of him as he listened to his music. This one looked like a man who worked selling life insurance, a man who opened and closed his briefcase dozens of times during the day, handing out pamphlets and explanations. That one was a secretary, but she was not with a good firm because her shoes were worn and cheap. Here came a con artist and there went a lovelorn housewife.

Sometimes Domingo saw people and things that were a bit scarier. There were gangs roaming the subway lines, gangs of kids about his age, with their tight jeans and baseball caps, rowdy and loud and for the most part dedicated to petty crimes. He looked down when those boys went by, his hair falling over his face, and they didn't see him, because nobody saw him. It was just like with the regular passengers; Domingo melted into the tiles, the grime, the shadows.

After an hour of people watching, Domingo went to look at the large TV screens in the concourse. There were six of them, displaying different shows. He spent fifteen minutes staring at Japanese music videos before it switched to the news.

#### SIX DISMEMBERED BODIES FOUND IN CIUDAD JUÁREZ. VAMPIRE DRUG WARS RAGE ON.

Domingo read the headline slowly. Images flashed on the video screen of the station. Cops. Long shots of the bodies. The images dissolved, then showed a beautiful woman holding a can of soda in her hands. She winked at him.

Domingo leaned against his cart and waited to see if the news show would expand on the drug war story. He was fond of yellow journalism. He also liked stories and comic books about vampires; they seemed exotic. There were no vampires in Mexico City: their kind had been a no-no for the past thirty years, ever since the old Federal District became a city-state, walling itself from the rest of the country. He still didn't understand what a city-state was exactly, but it sounded important and the vampires stayed out.

The next story was of a pop star, the singing sensation of the month, and then there was another ad, this one for a shoulder-bag computer. Do-

mingo sulked and changed the tune on his music player. He looked at another screen with pictures of blue butterflies fluttering around. Domingo took a chocolate from his pocket and tore the wrapper.

He wondered if he shouldn't head to Quinto's party. Quinto lived nearby, and though his home was a small apartment, they were throwing an all-night party on the roof, where there was plenty of space. But Quinto was friends with the Jackal, and Domingo didn't want to see that guy. Besides, he'd probably have to contribute to the beer budget. It was the end of the month. Domingo was short on cash.

A young woman wearing a black vinyl jacket walked by him. She was holding a leash with a genetically modified Doberman. It had to be genetically modified because it was too damn large to be a regular dog. The animal looked mean and had a green bioluminescent tattoo running down the left side of its head, the kind of decoration that was all the rage among the hip and young urbanites. Or so the screens in the subway concourse had informed Domingo, fashion shows and news reels always eager to reveal what was hot and what was not. That she'd tattooed her dog struck him as cute, although perhaps it was expected: if you had a genetically modified dog you wanted people to notice it.

Domingo recognized her. He'd seen her twice before, walking around the concourse late at night, both times with her dog. The way she moved, heavy boots upon the white tiles, bob-cut black hair, with a regal stance, it made him think of water. Like she was gliding on water.

She turned her head a small fraction, glancing at him. It was only a glance, but the way she did it made Domingo feel like he'd been doused with a bucket of ice. Domingo stuffed the remaining chocolate back in his pocket, took off his headphones, and pushed his cart, boarding her subway car.

He sat across from the girl and was able to get a better look at her. She was about his age, with dark eyes and a full, stern mouth. She possessed high cheekbones and sharp features. Overall, her face was imposing and aquiline. There was a striking quality about her, but her beauty was rather cutting compared to the faces of the models he'd viewed in the ads. And she was a beauty, with that black hair and the dark eyes and the way she stood, so damn graceful.

He noticed her gloves. Black vinyl that matched the jacket. She wasn't wearing a fancy outfit, but it fit her well; the clothes were of good quality, he could tell as much. The subway car stopped and Domingo fidgeted, wondering where she was headed, trying to build an imaginary biography for her and failing, distracted by her nearness.

The young woman patted the dog's head.

He was looking at her discreetly, and he knew how to do discreet, so he was a bit surprised when she turned and stared right back at him.

Domingo froze and then swallowed. He found his tongue with some effort.

"Hey," he said, smiling. "How are you doing tonight?"

She did not smile back. Her lips were pressed together in a precise, unyielding line. He hoped she wasn't thinking of letting the dog loose on him for staring at her.

The subway car was almost deserted, and when she spoke her voice seemed to echo around them even though she spoke very softly.

"Should you be out by yourself at this time of the night?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen," he replied. "It's early. It's just before midnight."

"No curfew?"

"No," he scoffed. "I live on my own."

"Ah, a man about town."

There was laughter in her voice even though she didn't laugh. It made Domingo feel stupid. He stood up, ready to push his shopping cart to the other side of the subway car, to leave her alone. This had been a terrible idea, what was he thinking talking to her.

Her gaze drifted, skipped him, and he assumed this was goodbye. Goodnight. Go to hell. Which was the only reasonable response from such a girl.

"I'm looking for a friend," she said unexpectedly.

Domingo blinked. He agreed, uncertain.

"Would you like to be my friend? I can pay you."

Domingo wasn't in the habit of prostituting himself. He'd done it once when he was in a pinch, after he'd left the circle of street kids. Times had been hard, and one did what he could to survive. He'd been cold, hungry, desperate for a few pesos. He wasn't any of those things now.

"Sorry, I'm not sure I understand," he said. "Did you—?"

"I'm getting off at the next station. Would you like to come with me?"

Domingo looked at the woman. He'd seen her walk by those other nights and he'd never thought she'd speak to him. When he'd tried to talk to a girl on the subway the previous year, she'd recoiled. Domingo couldn't blame her. He did look grubby. And now this beautiful woman was chatting him up. Who was he to imagine a babe of that sort was gonna give him the time of day?

He nodded. He'd never been a lucky guy, but maybe he was in luck today.

Her apartment building was located just a few blocks from a busy intersection. It looked rather run down, a box of bricks built in the '50s that had not been updated. The tiles that had once decorated its façade might have been green and lively in the beginning, but they were now a muddled brown. Many of them had slid off, revealing the naked cement beneath. The apartment's name was written on a plaque by the entrance, but someone had defaced it.

Though he was reluctant to part with it, Domingo left his shopping cart near the front door of the building. People stole your shit if you didn't keep an eye on it. Garbage pickers were notorious for it. You could spend hours gathering glass bottles only to come back and discover they'd disappeared. That's why you kept your stuff close. Domingo didn't think he could ask her if they could take the cart into her apartment, so he hid it behind the stairs and prayed nobody chucked it out.

They climbed the stairs and he noticed that the building was in better shape inside; there were tiles with cracks here and there, but some retained their original coloring. There were potted plants running down the hallway and he realized the apartments were organized around a center square. He leaned against a railing and peered down, spying the laundry area below, which had stone sinks and several clotheslines.

"Hey, you haven't told me your name," he said when they reached the fourth floor.

"Atl," she replied, taking out her keys.

"Is that foreign? What does that mean?"

"No. It's Nahuatl," when he looked befuddled she elaborated "You know. As in the language spoken by the Nahua? Ok, what they call Aztec, I suppose. It means 'water.'"

Ah, he did know about the Aztec having read the display around Templo Mayor, near the station there. It was an odd name but it was pretty. It suited her. He thought her voice sounded like water, like a stream filled with pebbles, though he'd never seen a real stream in his life. All he'd had were the periodic floods in Mexico City during the rainy season, when the garbage gets stuck in the sewers and the water overflows the drainage system, creating little rivers full of debris, rotten fruit, and dog shit. The door swung open and she turned on the light. The apartment was small and empty. Atl owned a rug with some cushions on top of it, but had no

couch, no television, and no table. She didn't even have a calendar on the wall. A very big window sported garish, tattered curtains, further spoiling the place.

He thought girls had more of an interest in decorating their apartments. He pictured nice living rooms with pink curtains and neat furniture. A stuffed animal, perhaps. That's how it looked like in the magazines, with rooms like museums. And the ads, the ads had told him to expect color coordination, scented candles on tiny tables.

The apartment did have a heavy smell, animal-like, probably courtesy of the dog. Perhaps she kept more than one pet.

"You haven't lived here long, have you?" he asked.

She stared at him and for a moment he worried that he'd offended her. Maybe she didn't have a lot of cash after all, and couldn't furnish the place. He was no one to judge.

"I'm passing through. Do you want tea?" she asked. Her voice carried a soft indifference.

Domingo would have preferred soda or a beer, but the girl seemed classy and he thought he ought to go with whatever she preferred.

"Sure," he said.

Atl took off her jacket and threw it on the floor. Her blouse was pale cream; it showed off her bony shoulders. She didn't bother taking off her gloves. Looking at her, he thought of smoke, of incense and altars, and the painting of a girl he'd seen in a discarded museum catalogue.

He followed her into the kitchen. She lit a match and placed the kettle on a burner.

"I'm Domingo," he told her.

Her gloved hands moved carefully, pulling out two cups, two teaspoons, and a box filled with tiny sugar cubes.

The dog padded into the kitchen. Atl leaned down, whispered something in its ear, and then it walked out.

She opened a tin decorated with pictures of orange blossoms. It was filled with white tea bags.

"I'm going to pay you a certain amount, just for coming here. If you agree to stay, I'll double it," she said.

"Listen," Domingo said, rubbing the back of his head, "you don't really need to pay me nothing. I mean, you're cute. I should be paying you. Not . . . um . . . not that I think you work that kind of gig. If you do that's all right too," he added quickly.

"I'm not what you think I am."

Atl looked at him as she fished out two tea bags and closed the tin. She grabbed a pad of lined notepaper that was attached to the refrigerator. It

had smiley kittens on it. He knew it wasn't hers; it was probably the relic of a previous tenant. She wasn't a smiley kitten girl, that was for sure.

"No, man, no, I wasn't saying, you know. Just . . . in case, I—"

"I'm a Tlāhuīhpochtli."

That's not a word he expected to hear. Domingo blinked. "You can't be. That's a type of vampire, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Domingo had heard about vampires. He'd seen the stories about them on the television. He'd read about them in old comic books and graphic novels. He'd never thought he would meet one, not here.

For the first time, he noticed a certain redness to her eyes, as though she had been awake for a long time, as well as dark circles faintly visible beneath her makeup.

"It's vampire-free territory in Mexico City," he mumbled.

How'd she gotten in the city? Sanitation should have nabbed her. Those Apostles of Health who were supposed to stop whatever new disease was going around, but who didn't do jack shit except harass people in the poor neighborhoods. What was it Quinto had said? Something about how the human species was self-destructing at a bacteriological level but sanitation in Mexico was too busy fining people to care. But they would have noticed her, wouldn't they? And if not them, then the cops.

Maybe she wasn't a vampire. Could just be a wealthy, crazy girl playing dress-up. But he didn't think so. He felt he was staring at the real thing.

"I know," she said, scribbling a number on the pad of paper and holding it up for him to see. "How would you like to not have to work for a whole month?"

Domingo leaned against the wall, arms crossed.

"That's more like five for me," he said.

He should have been more worried. He wasn't sure if vampires really did have mind powers or if he'd simply been lulled into a sense of comfort by the woman's appearance; either way, he didn't feel scared. He felt a bit giddy and nervous, but there was none of the true fear that should punctuate this moment. It was a good moment, like that time when he found a new pair of fancy sneakers in a trash bin, box and all.

Atl nodded. "I need young blood. You'll do."

"Wait. I'm not going to turn into a vampire, am I?" he asked, because you can never be too sure—and he wasn't sure of anything. Vampire comic books and shit, they contradicted themselves.

"No," she said, sounding affronted. "We are born like this."

"Cool."

The kettle whistled. Atl removed it from the burner and poured hot

water into the two cups. She placed the tea bags in the cups and offered one to him, pointing to the sugar.

“Help yourself.”

He grabbed a sugar cube. She tossed six into her cup. Atl’s spoon rattled against the cup’s sides as she stirred.

Vampire. Like in *Crypt of Darkness*. Something both strange and awesome and intimidating. She was pretty. She had money. She was cool. He didn’t hang out with cool people. He didn’t hang out with much of anyone.

Domingo placed his hands around the cup and took a sip.

“It won’t hurt much. What do you think?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I mean, do I still get to . . . you know . . . sleep with you?”

She let out a sigh and shook her head.

“No, and don’t try anything. Cualli will bite your leg off if you do.”

Domingo took another sip. He was disappointed. But then he wondered if he might not get a small kiss as a token of affection. A tiny smile. A brief hug. Any of those things would make him happy. Disappointment turned to hope. And there was, of course, the money. “How do we do this?” Domingo asked, setting down his cup.

Atl removed her gloves. Her fingers were long and beautiful. But the nails were sharp and black. It was not nail polish. These were her natural nails. These were a bird’s talons.

She raised those long hands and placed them on either side of his face. Domingo thought his previous idea about vampire powers might have been right, because he didn’t flinch. He just stared at her as her hair turned into feathers and her hands seemed to grow more talonlike.

She craned her neck.

“Don’t worry, this won’t take long,” she said. “And don’t move.”

Atl was part bird of prey, yet he did not move a muscle. She leaned down; her lips brushed his neck. It did not hurt . . . much. It was a quick stab of pain that burned down his neck and through his body. After a few minutes he did try to move as the pain slowly seemed to wake up a part of his brain that had been shut down, but it was too late. She held him in place, her strong, wicked talons digging into his shoulders.

It became enjoyable rather quickly. One moment he was flinching and the next there was a slow, sweet wave that dragged him down. It wasn’t like drinking booze or sniffing paint thinner, though he had tried both and discarded them as useless pursuits. It was a haze. The haze you experience when your eyes are heavy and you are about to fall asleep, where your limbs feel tired, your whole body is weighed down, and there is this soft, pleasant sensation as you surrender to exhaustion.

Domingo closed his eyes. Geometrical patterns exploded behind his eyelids, shifting from yellow to orange to crimson until they turned black and there was nothing but a heavy, inky blackness around him.

He felt his knees buckle. The velvet darkness cushioned him. It held him tight in its embrace. He felt himself sliding down and the darkness helped him, sliding down with him.

He lay in this velvet blackness for a while before drifting into a dream.

Domingo awoke with a blanket against his cheek. He raised his head. He was still in Atl's kitchen, on the floor, and the blanket was wrapped snug around him.

Atl was leaning against the refrigerator. She had her cup pressed against her lips. Her eyes were closed.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Don't try to stand up yet or you might vomit. I'll help you in a few minutes," she said.

Domingo touched his neck. He felt a bump, but it didn't seem like a big wound. Good. He'd half-feared she'd torn a chunk of flesh off when she first bit him . . . or whatever she did. He felt light-headed and his extremities were jumbled. He waited quietly, not knowing if he was allowed to speak.

"My legs feel funny," he said at last. "It's like they've fallen asleep."

"Mmm. Think of it as an anesthetic."

"Is it gonna hurt later?"

"No. Your neck might itch a bit, but that will pass in a day or two. It's like a mosquito bite."

"Do you always do that?" he asked.

"What?" she replied.

"Do you change?"

Atl opened her eyes and nodded. She took out a container with orange juice from the refrigerator. She filled a glass with the juice.

"You can't tell anyone. You understand?"

"I wouldn't," he said.

"Because I'd hurt you if you did," she said.

Her voice held no obvious threat, but he knew she meant it. It was in her face, which had no blunt edges. A smart man might have been intimidated. He was curious.

"Do you think you can stand up?" she asked.

"Yes."

She reached into a cupboard and grabbed a plastic box, pulling out a handful of pills, which she dumped over the kitchen table. Then she turned

to him and lifted him up with such ease—as though he were a rag doll—that it made him gasp.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“You need to eat well. You need to drink foods rich in iron. I have a few iron supplement pills for you. If you drink them with orange juice they’ll be more effective.”

She walked him to the table. Domingo had to lean against her. His hands trembled, but he managed to pop the pills into his mouth. He drank the whole glass of juice.

They stood together, Atl propping him up, for what seemed like a long while. The feeling had returned to his legs and the slight light-headedness that was plaguing him had vanished.

“Are you ready to go home?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

She walked him to the door, holding it open for him. He attempted to say goodbye, but she closed the door before he could speak.



She ought to have killed him. She should have drained him whole, broken his neck.

*And then what would I do with a corpse, stuff it in the refrigerator?*

It's not like she knew the first thing about disposing of a body.

Izel would have known. Ocoxochi Izel Iztac, First-Daughter, Lady of the Fragrant Flowers. The bright promise of their clan. They all called her Izel because she was "the only one," the precious child. Atl had been a secondary consideration from the day she was born. Atl of the Iztac. Atl Second-Born.

Atl who couldn't do anything right.

She wasn't Izel and she couldn't dwell on this. She'd done what she'd done. The boy would live. Let it be. No murder. It would not have been honorable anyway, he was no armed foe, nor the member of an enemy clan. Perhaps, considering that, Izel would have agreed it was best to let him go.

*But you have no honor,* a nagging voice that sounded like Izel whispered in her ear. Guilt spoke with her sister's voice.

Atl stopped scratching the dog's head and opened the bedroom window, letting in the night air. She felt strong. Alert. Giddy and brimming with energy. She thought about stretching her wings, sneaking along the rooftops.

It was too dangerous. Everything was too dangerous in this city. She missed the North and the desert with its endless dark skies, the coldness of its nights against her skin.

The Tlāhuīhpochtīn had moved around Mexico through the centuries, up and down the country, restless, likely nomadic in the beginning. Their exact place of origin was vague. Perhaps they'd roamed Baja California, by the sea, but the Bolsón de Mapimí also hid traces of her kin. In time they'd come in contact with the Aztecs, long before the foundation of Tenochtitlán and the establishment of their empire. But though the city of canals, with its mountains and volcano, had been a comfortable abode for a few centuries, they returned to the desert, then went back North. And though they might stray from their ancestral lands, the memory of the cirio trees and the yucca and the pitch-black sky above the arid land did not abandon them. Atl's mother was born in Sinaloa in 1895, and

though she lived in Mexico City for several decades, she never forgot the North. Neither could Atl, ever, no matter what happened.

Atl sat by the window, trying to remain still, holding her cup of tea between her hands. She took a sip and grimaced. It wasn't right. She headed back into the kitchen, in search of sugar cubes. She found them and discovered that the ants from the other day had returned and were eating the cubes she had left out in the open.

She crushed the ants with the palm of her hand, even though it would likely do little good. If they had found their way in once, they'd find their way in again.

She popped two sugar cubes into her mouth and wondered what she'd do about this pest. Ant repellent. What was a good ant repellent? Vinegar? Perhaps. Cinnamon. She didn't like the smell of it. Pepper? She thought ants didn't like pepper. Except for sugar cubes, some drinks, her tea satchels, and a bag of dog food, her kitchen was empty.

Atl supposed she ought to stop by the supermarket to buy pepper. She could also buy food. Cans of tuna and vegetables. Cereal. She would not eat it. It was for show. In case she had visitors, as she'd had tonight. Not that she planned to have many visitors. She wasn't staying in the most elegant of buildings. But that meant more sanitation sweeps. If a sweep did take place, they would look around, either to make sure she wasn't harboring illicit substances or to see if they could steal something. She could see a curious sanitation worker going through the kitchen drawers and finding them empty, a bit fishy, that. She could picture the worker staring at her. A young woman, alone, no ID papers and no food. Northern accent. Let me check . . . my, this woman's body temperature is not right.

Maybe they wouldn't peg her for a vampire. Maybe the curious sanitation worker would think she was a junkie or a Croneng. There were tons of people with Croneng's disease running around these days. It was a virus that made humans hemorrhage from the nose and gave them sores, spoiling the blood supply so that now on top of cancers, STDs, AIDS, and tuberculosis, vampires had to also watch their food to make sure it wasn't tainted with this new disease. Vomiting dirty blood was no fun.

She'd heard people blaming vampires for this, saying they had caused it, which was ridiculous, but humans had a way of blaming vampires for everything these days. Back in the Middle Ages—back when her kind was still half-hidden behind myth and superstition—some people thought vampires caused the plague. They did not, though the bubonic plague did help to expand the reach and power of the Necros. Necros, just like the German *Nachzehrers*, when in a pinch, could feed off carrion, something

unthinkable to other vampires. They found a plentiful supply of corpses in Europe while other vampires starved, deprived of a clean blood supply. The old wives' tale that vampires liked nubile virgins perhaps had some root in the sensitivity of vampires to tainted blood. If you had a virgin on your hands then you could avoid drinking the blood of a syphilitic. But since STDs were not the only awful diseases humans carried, that did not provide much protection against anything.

The boy had remarked about her lack of furniture. The furniture could be explained by a recent move, but the lack of food . . . yes, she must do something about that.

Atl sighed and put away the sugar cubes.

It was hard to think about those things. She wasn't used to keeping up appearances. She hadn't needed to. Back north, Atl had her mother and her sister and a host of servants to take care of her. The North was like a great oozing wound, and the vampires drank from it freely. Mexico City . . . it was not friendly to her kind. But she'd run out of options.

This was it. Her safe haven.

She hated the apartment, though. She hated the color of its walls and the scratches on the kitchen counters, the ancient dirt in the bath tiles and the way the pipes rattled. She hated the smell of it, the smell of the whole city. Dirty. When it rained, it smelled like wet garbage—and it rained constantly. The stench was worse in the subway, but she forced herself to take it. She lacked a license and ID papers, no way she could drive. Taxis were an option, but she was afraid of getting in an unknown vehicle. No place to run, there. It was better to brave the subway, to walk down the filthy streets with her umbrella. And she'd found *him* in the subway, at any rate, so good things did come from that place.

*Domingo.*

Atl again wondered if she had made the right choice. Her instinct and her upbringing compelled her to drag her food to her lair, but she still did not know if this was wise, if the way she'd handled him was foolish or efficient. And yet, what other alternative did she have? If she had fed in the streets, someone could have seen her. The same went for the cheap motels that charged by the hour. Too many nosy people, both cops and criminals.

There were other problems. A willing donor, for example. Procuring a sex worker from the streets meant dealing with a pimp, and Atl did not want to pick a fight with a brute who thought she was bruising the merchandise.

No, too much trouble there. That narrowed the options. Young blood . . . Twice before she had found street kids sleeping in alleys. They were both

out stone cold. She fed from them: no pimp, though she feared the eyes of vagrants upon her.

It was risky. Besides, the blood of the street kids was bitter from the cheap drugs and booze running through their veins. It gave Atl a headache and cramps. It almost made it worse than starving.

Atl had decided to change her tactics. Domingo had looked clean and nice enough. No telltale signs of drug use. He smelled healthy, too. His blood, when she tasted it, was warm and sweet. Old blood, sick blood, drugged blood: that was like feasting on carrion. Finally she had found a fresh, delicious meal.

She must make it last. She must conserve her energy. Atl drummed her fingers against the ceramic cup. There was plenty of time before sunrise. Unlike European vampires, Atl could handle the sun, though it weakened her. It required too much energy to move through the city in the daytime. She must save her strength. This meant sleeping longer.

Sleep had its dangers, however. Cualli could guard her but he was not infallible. Between staying up and wasting energy or sleeping and being vulnerable, Atl picked sleeping. She closed the window and slid open the closet's door. Inside were a sleeping bag, a pillow, a blanket, and scraps of paper. She had been nesting there. It was a big departure from her mother's luxurious home, with its Aztec artifacts and expensive furnishings. All that had been left behind. Atl had only her wits, some money, and the vague hope she would be able to find Verónica Montealban, and she wasn't exactly sure how she might manage that. What she had to go by were a few old papers her mother had held on to.

Atl got in the closet and reached beneath the pillow. She stared at the photograph. It was a Polaroid, one corner bent. The image showed her mother, and next to her, a young woman, whose hair was parted in the middle. It had been decades since the photo was taken.

Verónica Montealban was much older now. Very likely she did not resemble the young woman she was looking at. She might have left the city. She might even be dead. If she was alive, she wasn't making it easy for Atl to find her. Why would she? But she had been mother's companion, her *tlapalēhuiāni*, for a number of years—Atl refused to use the word "Renfield" to describe her; it was such a coarse term foisted upon them by Anglo pop culture.

Mother spoke of the human girl. She had been loyal, efficient. The adult Verónica had smuggled certain items for her mother, years after she had left her mother's side. She could be trusted, Mother said. If she found Verónica, Atl might be able to figure a way out of this mess. She couldn't stay in Mexico City forever, but leaving its limits meant certain death.

Guatemala. There had to be a way to get into Guatemala. Crossing into the States was out of the question; the northern border zone was too militarized. God, she needed papers, a smuggler, a damn weapon that packed a bigger punch than her switchblade knife.

*Well, you have to stop kidding yourself,* that voice that sounded like Izel's said. *You can't get to Verónica without Bernardino.*

He'd know where to find Verónica. But there was no assurance she could trust him, and since he was . . . since he was a Revenant and that particular type of European vampire could gobble *other* vampires, well . . . they were a bit like boogymen for the average vampire. There was also the issue of their customs. Vampires were incredibly territorial. They used envoys to communicate. She had none and could not imagine showing up at his place, dashing protocol. Although he'd been somewhat of a friend to her mother when she'd been much younger, mother said he'd turned on her in later years. Bernardino was dangerous. Paranoid. Still. There had been mention of certain debts owed by him, but these were vague allusions. All Atl had to bank on then was the value of her deceased mother's name, and she wasn't sure how far that might go. Her sister would have marched into Bernardino's house. Atl was too much of a coward.

Atl placed the photograph under the pillow. Cualli whined. She knew he wanted to sleep next to her, but she needed the dog to guard her.

"Cualli, sit," she ordered.

She slid the closet door shut, and then buried her face against the pillow. Atl gained control of her breathing, slowing it down. Sleep, when it came, was like plunging underwater. She sank into darkness, her breath slowing so much her chest was barely rising and falling.

The following evening, Atl decided to go shopping. It was a chance for a much-needed walk, but she was afraid of going outside. Each time she ventured into the city streets, it was an opportunity for a sly cop to ask for her ID. Staying inside the apartment, however, could be just as bad. Cabin fever would not be productive.

To hell with it. She needed to stretch her legs. She wasn't made for stillness. She'd heard of vampires who could happily burrow into the earth and spend their time quiet in their damp mounds of dirt. But those were other breeds. Atl put on her jacket and grabbed her dog's leash. It was raining, only a drizzle, so she pulled her hood up and did not bother with the umbrella. The all-night mini-supermarket was only three blocks from her place. Its sign glowed orange, then white. She told her dog to wait outside.

When she walked in an annoying bell rang to announce her arrival. She looked around, carefully scanning the place.

There was a tired man in an orange uniform behind the counter, protected by an acrylic partition. He was mesmerized by a small television set and did not even lift his eyes to look at her as she walked by. Three teenagers dressed in neon jackets were hanging in the store, busy chatting with each other. She could hear the music from one of the kids' headphones. Heavy metal.

She hated that music. It had no . . . symmetry.

Atl grabbed a plastic basket. She walked down one aisle, looking at the labels. She had never paid much attention to human food. She wondered what she should buy. Atl grabbed two cans of beans and tossed them into the basket. She located the pepper and bought more sugar cubes. She stopped to look at an area that had potato chips and candy on display. The lists of ingredients were alien to her. It wasn't like she ate this shit. Godoy's kind, the fuckers who called themselves Necros, could. She wasn't sure if Bernardino's type could stomach it.

Atl gritted her teeth and threw a bag of potato chips into her basket. Maybe she should get more of those iron supplements she'd grabbed the other day. She didn't know if they actually worked, but what did she know in the end? Barely nothing.

She should not be in this situation, second-born and still woefully young. She was twenty-three in a family that could span centuries, the baby of the clan. Twenty-three and spoiled, because she had not cared much for anything that wasn't fun and blood. She remembered Izel chiding her a few months ago for her disinterest in the family business, for gallivanting around the city on her new motorcycle. But Mother hadn't cared.

Atl smirked. Why would she? Mother had preferred Izel. Izel was the strong one. Izel was the heir. Izel was everything. Atl was just the spare.

Now Izel was dead. And Atl couldn't do a thing on her own.

The bell rang again, startling her. Two cops walked into the joint.

Atl's hand tightened around the plastic handle of the basket. God damn luck. She steeled herself, shifting toward the back of the store, closer to the refrigerators.

The teenagers were laughing raucously. They were popping chocolates into their mouths.

"Hey, whose idea was it to park a car and take two whole spaces out front, huh?" one of the cops yelled.

The teenagers turned their heads. One of them tripped and spilled dozens of bright, colorful chocolates onto the floor. They scattered wildly upon the white tiles.

Atl felt the immediate desire to throw herself to her knees and start counting them. It was a nervous tic, a thing about her kind. She closed her eyes and rested a hand against one of the refrigerators.

“It’s, like, for two minutes, man,” one of the teens said.

“Two minutes. Okay, you fucker, show me your license. All of you, IDs and licenses.”

One of the cops had lit a cigarette. She smelled it as if he were standing next to her. But he wasn’t. He was on the other side of the store. He wasn’t close. Everything was normal. She was just a normal person going out for a normal walk. Buying groceries. People did that.

“You going to give me a fine?” one of the teenagers said. “Are you?”

“What are you high on, kid?”

Shoes squeaked upon the floor. The stench of the cigarette drifted closer to her.

A cop was heading her way.

She would be fine. She looked perfectly normal. She’d fed recently. Her eyes weren’t red, her cheeks were not too hollow.

She would be fine.

Atl looked down, staring at the prices stuck inside the refrigerator. Her lips moved silently, mouthing the numbers.

The cop stopped next to her. She didn’t look at him.

“Show me your license and ID,” he said.

“I’m not with them,” Atl said. “You can ask them.”

He paused to look at her. His gaze lingered.

“Hey you, why are you handcuffing me, motherfucker? My dad is a lawyer, you dick!” one of the teenagers yelled.

The cop next to Atl turned his head and yelled to the teenager.

“Shut your mouth!” he said, then sighed and looked at her again. He seemed tired. “Damn kids, probably going out clubbing, you know?”

She nodded, wishing he’d leave her be.

The policeman opened the refrigerator door and pulled out an energy drink, then walked back to the front of the store. The teenagers were muttering to each other, the one who had been handcuffed still repeating the bit about his lawyer father. The policeman who had spoken to her told them they were headed to the station. They protested, and then came the expected bribery. Once they had their money the cops undid the teen’s handcuffs, bringing to an end the evening’s performance.

The cashier, sitting behind the partition, returned to his TV watching as soon as the policemen and the teenagers left the store.

Atl waited for a couple of minutes, grabbed an energy drink, and

dumped it in her shopping basket before standing in front of the cashier and shoving a few bills beneath the opening in his partition. She didn't bother waiting for him to give her her change.

She walked outside, rubbed Cualli's head, and glanced around her. The street was empty. She was fine.

But she needed to make a damn move before she ended up like Mother and Izel. Now.

"Come on," she told the dog.